3: Skrine G-3 (1922-1924) 1926 All Sinkiang All



In some ways the Tarim Basin is more than old-fashioned—it is mediæval. I remember reading the late Elroy Flecker's play "Hassan" and being charmed with its poetry, but a little superior about the romantic glamour which it evidently had for London audiences—the Golden Road to Samarkand, and so on.

"Samarkand's nothing," I wrote in a letter home. "Here at Kashgar we are twice as far beyond Samarkand as Samarkand is far from London. After all, the city of Tamerlane is directly connected with Charing Cross by steamship and railway, whereas if you want to come to Kashgar you must undertake a real caravan-journey, and a long one too. Even before the days of railways and steamships the caravan journey from Baghdad to Samarkand was not half as long as that from China Proper to this place by Shensi, Tunhwang and Keriya, which is still used occasionally by camel caravans bringing Chinese tea and silks. Then there is the still longer, though cooler, north road across the Mongolian steppes, along which an old Chinese carrier came the other day. He left railhead with his camels last September and turned up smiling in June, talking of his nine months' journey as if it had been a week-end trip. He told me that he had marched for fifty days once without seeing a human being. . . .

"About Baghdad, too, it is a little difficult to enthuse if you have been there. Constantinople, yes; but not Baghdad. Anyway, in twentieth-century Yarkand we can match the characters in 'Hassan' and the things they did in eighth-century Baghdad. Take the Chief of the Beggars, for example. The Beggars, or *Qalandars*, are a guild recognized by the authorities with their *Shangia* or Chief, just as in old Baghdad, and the Chief of the Beggars is one of the wealthiest men in Yarkand. This is because he and his men are in close alliance with the *Shangia* of the *Pashraps* or Chief of Police (a Turki subordinate official) and *his* men. The two Chiefs co-operate in the organization of burglaries and thefts, sharing the spoil. Practically everything that is stolen in Yarkand comes eventually into the hands of one or other of these two men. Since the Chinese made opium contraband a few years ago, too, they have reaped a rich harvest out of the illicit trade in that drug between Afghanistan and Yarkand.

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[1] The result of the Governor of Sinkiang's prohibition of opium cultivation and importation has been instructive. Until it became contraband, the consumption of opium in southern Sinkiang was comparatively small and prices were low; but once the import from Afghanistan and Semirechia was prohibited, the price went up and it became "the thing" not only to smoke but to smuggle it. There came to be big money in the business, and this, together with the excitements of opium-running among the wild mountains of the Sino-Afghan frontier, attracted the most adventurous spirits in the country. The Urumchi Government and the more efficient of the District Magistrates do their best to stop the smuggling, which is only as profitable as it is because there is absolutely no cultivation of the poppy in Sinkiang, a fact to which the Goverment point with justifiable pride;

3: Skrine G-3 (1922-1924) 1926 All Sinkiang All



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"This is how they work. As every one who is acquainted with Muhammadan countries knows, it is a *sawāb* or merit-acquiring action to give alms to any beggar, whether he deserves it or not. Consequently the fraternity flourish even as the green bay tree; also, they hear all that is going on. They therefore make admirable spies and allies for the police. Suppose, then, that an opium-running convoy from Afghanistan is reported by the beggars to be approaching Yarkand. The smugglers always break up into parties of two or three among the foothills above the city and endeavour to enter with their loads by night. The Chief of Police then calls the Chief of the Beggars to his garden outside the city and the two of them concoct a plan of campaign something like this: on the nights when the smugglers are expected the Chief of the Beggars will post parties of his men near the most likely of the many holes in the city walls, with orders to intercept any smugglers they can get hold of and drag them off to the garden of the Chief of Police; the *pashraps* or watchmen are to patrol the streets and environs of the town and do likewise. When the time comes the two Chiefs await the result at the appointed place and divide the spoil, which usually consists of heavy blackmail in kind taken from the captured smugglers.

"Think of the dramas that must be enacted at a place like Yarkand! There must be enough in one year to make plots for a score of 'Hassans.' Everything is there, from the comic rivalry between the Chief of Police and the Captain of the Military, who is represented by the Tungling or (Chinese) commandant of the garrison with his locally-recruited soldiers, to the tyrant Harun-ar-Rashid and his torture-chamber. General Ma, Titai of Kashgaria, with the big hay-chopper with which he slices men's limbs off joint by joint, would play the latter to the life."

The oases of the Tarim Basin are a land flowing with milk and, if not honey, almost everything else. D. has a vivid and by no means overdrawn picture of the Kashgar bazaars in one of her letters home.

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"In the autumn the bazaars, always well supplied, positively overflow with things to eat. Millers sit in their shops behind mountains of flour, next door to them grain-merchants squat surrounded by huge sacks of golden corn-cobs, rice, wheat and millet. The vegetable stalls are weighed down with enormous onions, lettuces, cabbages, bundles of spinach and strange local vegetables which are new to us. Even the tinsmiths, the cloth-merchants, the cap-sellers have fruit and vegetables to sell, and at every corner sits some one with baskets of peaches, melons, pomegranates and grapes. Luscious nectarines fall off the stalls and the street-boys do not even trouble to pick them up. Horses and donkeys snatch at bundles of hay or dried lucerne

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but the extreme difficulty of the frontier, and the countless secret paths by which determined men riding ponies like mountain goats can inport the drug, make the prevention of smuggling an impossible task. Also there is the co-operation between the two "Hassan" characters described above.

3:Cable & French M-5 (1926) 1927 AF13 Northwest China
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be a Qazaq. She wore a printed cotton gown to her ankles, and over it a striped coat, cut with an old-fashioned waistline, and down the back seam the stripes met in fishbone pattern, while her head and face were swathed in the nunlike headgear worn by all Qazaq women. A call from our driver brought an acquiescing response from her, and he drew up as she now moved toward the great mound of drying cow-dung, which is the inevitable adjunct to the Qazaq home. Her fireplace was of the simplest, a deep hole hollowed in the ground, and three iron rods and a hook, from which a kettle hung. She dexterously placed the cakes of cow dung on the embers, and blowing on them, in a short time there was a glowing fire and a singing kettle. One of her children was seen carrying water from the spring, while the other was collecting fuel, but both now came running to see us. Accepting her invitation we entered the tent, and here found her husband, a Honan man, lying down with the hateful opium pipe by his side. Nevertheless, with the manners of a gentleman, he at once rose, spread a carpet for us, and with a gesture placed his pipe at our disposal, but adding as he did so: 'You have none of these bad habits in your country.' We sat and talked with this intelligent man, who for some unknown reason had left China, wandered across the desert, and thrown in his lot with the Qazaq people, taking one of their women to be his wife and the mother of his children. Another of these enigmatic people gathered in this strangest of countries, where a man's past is known only to himself, to be buried and forgotten.

While we were talking Sandy Macnab was working. Producing a length of cotton material, of suitable size and shape to fit between the shafts of his cart, he proceeded to fasten it so as to form a feeding trough, in